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The Creation Account in Genesis 1: Our World Only or the Universe?

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A cursory reading of Gen 1:1 has led many to conclude that it refers to the absolute beginning of the heavens and the earth. In other words, Gen 1:1 is seemingly not a part of the six-day creation, so therefore it must describe an earlier creation of the “entire physical universe,” including “galaxies, stars, planets, etc.”¹ One believer in this view maintains that “the creation of Gen 1:1 is the original and earlier creation which precedes the six-day creation mentioned from Gen 1:3 on.”²

Those who look at the creation narrative that way tend to base their scientific³ or philosophical deductions on that simple yet profound account of creation.⁴ However, such deductions might not do justice to the intention of the author.

¹ Hugh Ross, *Creation and Time: A Biblical and Scientific Perspective on the Creation-Date Controversy* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 153, table 16.1.

² Yoshitaka Kobayashi, “The Primordial Creation (Heaven and Earth),” 3, Lecture Notes for OTST 640: Old Testament Theology, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 1992. Dr. Kobayashi translated Gen 1:1–2 this way: “In the beginning *when* God *had* created the heavens and the earth, then the earth was formless and void, and the darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Ibid.; italics his).

³ For example, in some Protestant circles, scholars tried to harmonize “the Mosaic account of creation with the idea then being advanced by certain scientific men, that the earth had passed through long ages of geological change . . . According to the view, the stratified layers of rock that compose much of the earth’s surface were deposited during the course of the supposed cataclysms, and the fossils buried in them are presumed to be the remains of life that existed on this earth prior to that time” (“Additional Note on Chapter 1,” *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1953–1978], 1:218).

⁴ P. J. Wiseman, *Ancient Records and the Structure of Genesis: A Case for the Literary Unity*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 88, observes the simplicity of the creation narrative, writing: “Naturally the wording is simple, but the truth conveyed is profound. Human as

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Does the creation account in Gen 1 also concern the creation of the universe beyond our world or mainly the creation of this planet earth? Siegfried Horn observes that “[T]he Creation narrative (Gen 1 and 2) is concerned primarily with the bringing into existence of this earth, the sun, the planets and the living creatures found on earth.”⁵ Clearly, there is a divergence of opinions regarding Gen 1:1.

The purpose of this paper is to discover whether the creation week as portrayed in Gen 1 concerns only this world (i.e., this planet earth) or the creation of the whole universe. To accomplish this purpose, we will examine contextually Gen 1 and some of its significant wordings. Hence, we will mainly focus our attention on the account of Creation week as described in Gen 1. We will also examine other OT texts in so far as they might help us clarify the issue at hand. Next, we will look at the Hebrew conception of the physical world as revealed in the OT and the distinctive Hebrew thinking about this planet earth in the framework of creation.

A Closer Look at Genesis 1

Neils-Erik Andreasen admits that the wording of Gen 1:1 is a plain statement that even a child can easily understand, and yet “the object of interpretative disagreement.”⁶ Hence, in this section of the essay we will look closely at Gen 1, particularly the phrase “in the beginning” and the words “heavens and earth,” within the context of Gen 1. Then we will examine other usages of those words in the OT to ascertain their real meanings.

In the Beginning. The phrase “in the beginning God created” (Heb. *bʿrēʾšît bārāʾ ʾlōhîm*) in Gen 1:1 elicits various defensible interpretations.⁷ Gordon J.

the language is, it is still the best medium by which God could communicate with man. It is God teaching Adam, in a simple yet faultless way, how the earth and the things which he could see on and around it had been created. . . . Adam is told just as much as his mind could understand. The details and processes are not fully revealed. Had they been, how could he and later ages have understood them? We could claim, then, that the first section of Genesis is the most ancient piece of writing. It is the record of what God told Adam. It is not an impersonal general account. It is God teaching the first man the elemental things about the universe, at the very dawn of human language. . . . Let us note the simplicity with which the facts are presented. There is a type of repetition and simplicity recurring in the Scripture.” Wiseman is, of course, merely speculating when he writes that God revealed the Genesis 1 account to Adam. The text itself does not say so.

⁵ “Creation,” *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (1979).

⁶ “The Word ‘Earth’ in Genesis 1:1,” *Origins* 8 (1981): 13. Shalom M. Paul writes, “The opening sentence in the story—many commentators think—begins with a temporal clause, ‘When God began to create the heavens and the earth’ (Gen. 1:1), continues with a circumstantial clause telling of the existence of the darkness and void (1:2), and then in two main clauses (1:3) relates the first act by which God, by divine fiat, created cosmic order out of primeval chaos: ‘God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light’ (‘Creation and Cosmogony in the Bible,’ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* [1972], corr. ed., 5:1059).

⁷ For example, Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 31, states that the word *berēʾšît* can be classified as “being either in the construct case or the absolute

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Wenham enumerates “four possible understandings of the syntax of these verses [i.e. vv. 1–3].”⁸ First, v. 1 can be considered as a “temporal clause subordinate to the main clause in v. 2,” and thus should be translated as: “In the beginning when God created, . . . the earth was without form . . .” Second, v. 1 can be regarded as a “temporal clause subordinate to the main clause in v. 3,” while v. 2 “is a parenthetical comment.” Based on this second view, the translation then is like this: “In the beginning when God created . . . (now the earth was formless) God said . . .” Third, v. 1 can be viewed as a “main clause, summarizing all the events described in vv. 2–31,” as if it were “a title to the chapter as a whole.” If v. 1 is understood that way, it is translated as “In the beginning God was the creator of heaven and earth.” Then the nature of God as creator of heaven and earth is explained in the subsequent verses of 2–31. Finally, v. 1 can be viewed as “a main clause describing the first act of creation.” Then vv. 2 and 3 “describe subsequent phases in God’s creative activity.”

Interestingly, Wenham observes that all of these translations except for the last one “presuppose the existence of chaotic pre-existent matter before the work of creation began.” William White observes, however, that not only do they presuppose the existence of chaotic elements, but they also presuppose that the first words are related to “‘*enuma elish*,’ which begins the Babylonian epic of creation.”⁹ He adds that “there is no evidence to connect the two different terms [i.e. *bərēšit* and *enuma elish*], the one in Hebrew and the other in Babylonian.” In fact, the Genesis and the Babylonian creation accounts have more differences than similarities.¹⁰

The presupposition that the world was in a chaotic condition before the work of creation began comes from those who believe that the creation account in Genesis is borrowed from Israel’s ancient Near Eastern neighbors. This belief has no plausible support. Gerhard F. Hasel’s conclusion after examining the cosmology of Gen 1 in comparison with its ancient Near Eastern counterpart is worth quoting here in full:

G[e]n[esis] cosmology as presented in Gen 1:1–2:4a appears thus basically different from the mythological cosmologies of the ancient Near East. It represents not only a “complete break” with the ancient Near Eastern mythological cosmologies but represents a parting of

case. . . . If it is absolute then Genesis 1:1 is an independent clause. If it is construct then 1:1 is a dependent clause. Although this is not a source of relief to the reader, it must be pointed out that grammatically *bərēšit* can be defined, as it stands, as either in the absolute or the construct case.”

⁸ *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 1:11 (all quotes in this paragraph and the first quote in the next).

⁹ William White, “*re’shit*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:826.

¹⁰ See, for example, Gerald W. Wheeler, “Appendix A: The Genesis Creation Account,” in *The Two-Tailed Dinosaur: Why Science and Religion Conflict Over the Origin of Life* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1975), 182–91; William H. Shea, “A Comparison of Narrative Elements in Ancient Mesopotamian Creation-Flood Stories with Genesis 1–9,” *Origins* 11 (1984): 9–29.

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the spiritual ways which meant an undermining of the prevailing mythological cosmologies.¹¹

In other words, the creation account was written with a polemical purpose. It challenges “the theology and ethics of ancient orientals,” exposing their wrong beliefs on “polytheism and the human situation.”¹² The Genesis creation account declared to the pagan nations that “the world was not run by a set of capricious amoral deities for their own benefit, but was created by one sovereign holy God who controlled all things and desired the good of his supreme creature, man.”¹³

Going back to the issue of different interpretations of Gen 1:1–2, we can notice that the preference of one translation over another depends basically on one’s presuppositional lenses. If Bible students presuppose that Gen 1:1 is a statement about the beginning of everything or an earlier creation, then they choose a translation that suits their own scientific or theological framework. But the question we should ask is whether the original author of Genesis intended to make a statement regarding an earlier creation or had other concerns.

Another difficulty in deciding which translation is closest to the intention of the author lies “in the difficulty of harmonizing the assertion of v. 2 concerning the chaotic primitive condition of the earth with a comprehensive statement concerning the creation of the universe” in v. 1.¹⁴ Indeed, Gen 1:2 is a problematic text which is “often used to describe the condition of the very first earth.”¹⁵ The account in v. 2 also implies that the earth was already in existence before the work of creation began in v. 3. If this is how v. 2 is to be understood, it suggests then that there were two stages of creation with a temporal “interval between the original creation of matter [of the planet] and the creation of life [on earth].”¹⁶

The supposition that v. 2 describes “the chaotic primitive condition of the earth” has no grammatical support. Based on the rules of Hebrew grammar, v. 2

¹¹ “The Significance of the Cosmology in Genesis 1 in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (1972): 20. See also, idem., “The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81–102.

¹² G. J. Wenham, “Creation, The Genesis Account,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed., ed. J. D. Douglas et al (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1996), 241. Cf. Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 94–95.

¹³ Wenham, “Creation, The Genesis Account,” 241. Larry G. Herr (“Why [and How] Was Light Created Before the Sun?” *Adventist Review* [21 November 1985]: 9) explains why the light was created first before the luminaries—the sun and moon. He notes, “Could it be that, by creating light and the daily cycle *before* [italics his] the luminaries, God declared them to be dependent upon Him, rather than upon pagan deities? The dependence of light upon God rather than the sun became an avowal of His omnipotence in Creation” (Herr, 9).

¹⁴ Walter Eichrodt, “In the Beginning: A Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible,” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; London: SPCK, 1984), 65.

¹⁵ Andreasen, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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is not a verbal clause but “a pure noun clause,”¹⁷ and must be translated as “‘the earth *was* unformed and unfilled,’ not ‘the earth *became* unformed and unfilled.’”¹⁸ Likewise, accepting the idea of a chaotic condition of the earth “could lead to the impossible suggestion that God’s first creative act was not good.”¹⁹

In contention with the idea of a temporal interval between Gen 1:1 and Gen 1:2, Andreasen notes that the earth in v.1 and in v.2 has no temporal distinction but merely a distinction of perspective. We will discuss this in the next section of this paper when we come to the subject of “heavens and earth.” Moreover, a temporal interval between vv.1 and 2 has been construed because of a misconception that Gen 1:1 is “an absolute temporal start to creation.”²⁰ However, Francis Andersen argues that

the term “beginning” in Gen 1:1 marks the commencement of the story,²¹ not the absolute beginning of everything,²² . . . it does not deal with ultimate origins. *When the story begins* (in verse 3), darkness and water already exist. Nothing is said, one way or the other, about how they came to be there, and no inference whatsoever can be made . . .²³

As has already been noted, the description of Gen 1:2 seems to suggest that the earth was already in existence, and earth is specifically portrayed as *tōhū*

¹⁷ E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910, 1990), 454 [¶141i].

¹⁸ Richard M. Davidson, “In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1,” *College and University Dialogue* 6:3 (1994): 11; italics his.

¹⁹ Andreasen, 16.

²⁰ R. K. Harrison, “Creation,” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (1975–1976), 1:1022.

²¹ “The creative activity of God is also enclosed by two similarly worded inclusions, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the six days of God’s creative work. Genesis 1:1, the first verse of the Bible, is well known: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ The final inclusion occurs in Genesis 2:1: ‘Thus the heavens and the earth were finished.’ Because of the similarity of the phrases and their location at the beginning and the end of God’s creative activity, we can conclude that Genesis 1:1 is a parade example of a beginning inclusion” (Larry G. Herr, “Was There More Than One Creation?” *Adventist Review* [5 July 1984]: 10).

²² Davidson, 11, thinks Gen 1:1 is an account of the absolute beginning and thus seemingly faces a dilemma and asks, “When did the absolute beginning of the heavens and the earth in verse 1 occur? Was it at the commencement of the seven days of Creation or sometime before?” He solves this by explaining that “It is possible that the ‘raw materials’ of the heavens and the earth in their unformed-unfilled state were created long before the seven days of creation week. This is the ‘passive gap’ theory. It is also possible that the ‘raw materials’ described in Genesis 1:1, 2 are included in the first day of the seven-day Creation week. This is called the ‘no gap’ theory.”

²³ “On Reading Genesis 1–3,” in *Backgrounds for the Bible*, ed. Michael Patrick O’Connor and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 141; italics his. Cf. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 24 (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 153; Harrison, 1:1022–23; Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 156 [section 9.6e].

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wābōhû (unformed and unfilled). However, David Toshio Tsumura suggests that “the main reason for the author’s mentioning the earth as *tōhû wābōhu* in this setting is to inform the audience that the earth is ‘not yet’ the earth as it was known to them.”²⁴ He further indicates that the author of Genesis “uses experiential language in this verse to explain the initial situation of the earth as ‘not yet.’”²⁵

If we will allow such an interpretation, then Gen 1:1 has other concerns than to tell its original readers about the ultimate origins of primordial life. Thus, any inference that the first phrase of Genesis concerns an earlier creation or a statement regarding the absolute beginning of everything in the entire universe is unwarranted. We can safely say then that the creation account of Gen 1:1 “concerns this world, our earth, and that it involves the ecological system within which we live.”²⁶

Heavens and Earth. As noted above, one of the problems in designating a temporal interval between Gen 1:1 and Gen 1:2 is the impression that vv. 1 and 2 are actually referring to two different “earths.” The “earth” (Heb. *’āreṣ*) in the phrase “heavens and earth” is commonly understood as distinct not only temporally but also chronologically from the *’ereṣ* in Gen 1:2 onward.

This is the common understanding of *’ereṣ* in v. 1, probably because heavens and earth in that verse is misunderstood as being two different and separate realms. However, the literary study of those two terms (i.e. “heavens and earth”) helps clarify the apparent distinction. Harrison writes: “[T]he phrase ‘heavens and earth’ is an expression known technically as *merismus*, in which antonymic pairs describe not elements, but the totality of the situation.” Hence, “the phrase should be rendered simply ‘the cosmos,’” as understood by the author.²⁷

Andreasen writes that “in the expression ‘heaven and earth,’ *’ereṣ* is part of an inclusion encompassing everything God has created from the terrestrial to the celestial realm.”²⁸ He further maintains that *’ereṣ* here “is concerned neither with the material nor with the territory of the earth, but simply with the lower end of the spectrum that describes God’s whole creation.” He adds, “[W]hen we ask, therefore, What is the heaven and the earth God created in Genesis 1:1?” the answer is “everything that follows in Genesis 1:2–2:4, but the chief attention is given to the earth, the fruitful surface that can sustain and maintain life.” It

²⁴ David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation*, JSOT Supplement Series 83 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 43.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Andreasen, 17–18.

²⁷ Harrison, 1:1022; Cf. A. M. Honeyman, “Merismus in Biblical Hebrew,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71 (1952): 16.

²⁸ Andreasen, 16.

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suggests then that Gen 1:1 “announces in summary fashion that God created the heavens and the earth, followed by a description of this event.”²⁹

Furthermore, based on his study of the Hebrew word *’āreṣ*, Andreasen concludes that Gen 1 is not depicting “a second stage of a two-stage creation, first the matter of the planet, then the earth, with a *temporal interval* [italics mine] in between.”³⁰ He further writes that “any temporal distinction between them [our world system and the earth as dry land] we will have to introduce on our own initiative, without the help of the Bible.”³¹ This fact would allow us to say that “Creation week did not involve the heaven that God has dwelt in from eternity. The ‘heavens’ of Genesis 1 and 2 probably refer to the planets and stars nearest the earth.”³² It seems to suggest then that the “heavens and the earth” in v.1 refers to our world system and not to other worlds.

Admittedly, we have a tendency to make a distinction “between earth and planet because science has given us a long chronology for the existence of the planet, whereas the Bible has given us a short chronology for the earth.”³³ However, the Hebrew Bible is not making any such distinction. After all, biblical creation is not meant to give a detailed scientific report.³⁴

On the other hand, there is a distinction

between the earth as land and planet (world) because the former represents the realm of human life and its dominion, whereas the latter is God’s work and charge: thus God created the heavens and the earth (the whole world), whereas the earth (dry land) was made for life and for mankind. The distinction is based upon a perspective of function, not of chronology, and consequently no explicit temporal distinction between the two can be expected, nor indeed is found.³⁵

Evidently, Gen 1:1 is silent about the first universal creation. Any inference to make room for an earlier destroyed creation or the creation of the entire universe is going beyond the intent of the text. As Andersen puts it, “[Gen 1] is

²⁹ Ibid., 17. However, in opposition to the belief that v. 1 is simply a summary, Davidson, 11, argues that “if Genesis 1 begins with only a title or summary, then verse 2 contradicts verse 1. God creates the earth (verse 1), but the earth preexists creation (verse 2). This interpretation simply cannot explain the reference to the existence of the earth already in verse 2 in the use of the term earth. Therefore I conclude that Genesis 1:1 is not simply a summary or title of the whole chapter.”

³⁰ Andreasen, 18.

³¹ Ibid.

³² [P. Gerard Damsteegt], *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), 71.

³³ Andreasen, 17.

³⁴ Cf. Bernard W. Anderson, “The Earth Is the Lord’s: An Essay on the Biblical Doctrine of Creation,” *Interpretation* 9 (January 1955): 4.

³⁵ Andreasen, 17.

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what it is and it says what it says, and to expect it to say more, to make it say more, is to pervert it.”³⁶

The Hebrew Conception of the World

In this section of the essay, based on the unique understanding the Hebrew people had of their world, we will be able to decide whether they were really concerned with the world beyond them in the context of creation. In the following discussion, we shall see that the Hebrews were not much concerned with whatever might be beyond this world because they perceived their world in unity, looking at their world in a concrete way, and they did not perceive their world as preexistent.

The World Is in Unity. When Gen 1:1 says God created the “heavens and earth,” we are quick to accept that as a statement of the creation of the entire universe,³⁷ thinking probably that there is a separation between “heavens” and “earth.” However, the way the Hebrew Scriptures meant such an expression is not the way we understand them today, as if they were a dichotomy. They are in unity and refer to this world in which the Hebrews lived and moved.

Jacques B. Doukhan indicates that heavens and earth “applies only to the human universe and does not refer to worlds which are beyond human experience. The Hebrew concept of the world refers only to the created world in which man is a part.”³⁸ He further indicates that “the Hebrew is not concerned with other worlds (although he does not ignore them, Job 38:7; Ps 148:2–4) nor is he with the scientific objective reality of the world. Only the created world as it relates to him interests him.”³⁹ In the same line of thought, John H. Sailhamer indicates that “the phrase ‘the heavens and the earth,’ or more precisely, ‘sky and land,’ is a figure of speech for the expression of totality. Its use in the Bible appears to be restricted to the totality of the present world order.”⁴⁰ In sum, the

³⁶ Andersen, 141.

³⁷ Similarly, such acceptance has led to this kind of thinking, too: “Some people are puzzled, and understandably so, by the verses that say that God ‘created the heavens and the earth’ (Gen 1:1; cf. 2:1; Ex 20:11) and that He made the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day of Creation week 6,000 years ago (Gen 1:14–19). Were all heavenly bodies brought into existence at that time?” (*Seventh-day Adventist Believe . . .*, 71).

³⁸ Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of the Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1993), 196.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁰ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 84. Sailhamer also writes that the phrase heavens and earth “is equivalent to the ‘all things’ in Isaiah 44:24 (cf. Ps 103:19; Jer 10:16). Of particular importance is that its use elsewhere in Scripture suggests that the phrase includes the sun and moon as well as the stars (e.g. Joel 3:15–16 [MT 4:15–16]). Since Genesis 1:1 describes God’s creating the universe, we should read the rest of the chapter from that perspective” (*Ibid.*). Cf. Herman J. Austel, “*shāmayim*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:935–36.

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Hebrew people viewed their world holistically, and it was primarily this world that interested them.

There are many illustrations in the Hebrew Bible that reflect such holistic thought. For example, the Hebrew word *ʿbōdâ* can mean either “work”⁴¹ or “worship,”⁴² depending on the context. Though this similarity is not unique to Hebrew, it may suggest a recognition, perhaps, in a subtle way, that work can be worship and worship can be work. Though this idea may be strained, it is in line with the Hebrew tendency to see every domain of life as belonging to God.⁴³ Indeed, the holistic worldview of the Hebrews is without any hint of dichotomy.

Meanwhile, let me reiterate the fact, pointed out by Doukhan, that although the Hebrews are not so much concerned about other worlds, they do not totally ignore them, as evident in the books of Job and Psalms. But in the Genesis creation account, it is doubtful whether the original author or readers were aware of the creation of other worlds—worlds beyond their phenomenal language and experience.

Since the ancient Hebrews perceived the world (i.e., the heavens and the earth) of Gen 1 as a totality and in unity, it is difficult to accept the idea that Gen 1:1 is also talking about the creation of other worlds. For them there seems to be no other world than the earthly world.

The World Is Perceived in a Concrete Way. It has been long acknowledged that the Hebrew people were not much given to abstract or metaphysical thinking. They were rather more concrete, not only in their expressions, but also in the way they perceived things. This distinctive Hebrew thought shines throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, “‘be angry’ is ‘burn in one’s nostrils’ (Exod 4:14); ‘disclose something to another’ or ‘to reveal’ is ‘unstop someone’s ears’ (Ruth 4:4); ‘have no compassion’ is ‘hard-heartedness’ (1 Sam 6:6); ‘stubborn’ is ‘stiff-necked’ (2 Chron 30:8; cf. Acts 7:51); ‘get ready’ or ‘brace oneself’ is ‘gird up the loins’ (Jer 1:17); and ‘to be determined to go’ is ‘set one’s face to go’ (Jer 42:15, 17; cf. Luke 9:51),”⁴⁴ to mention only a few.

If this is true in many aspects of Hebrew thinking, then this must be also true in the way ancient Hebrews perceived their world. One of the evidences of this is the way they describe their world. As Luis Stadelmann puts it:

⁴¹ See, e.g., Gen 29:27; Exod 1:14; Lev 23:7–8; Num 28:18, 25–26; Ps 104:23; 1 Chron 27:26, where *ʿbōdâ* is also translated as “work.”

⁴² The Arabic root meaning of the Hebrew word for “worship” also reflects the meaning of “work.” See Walter C. Kaiser, “*ʿbōd*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:639.

⁴³ Marvin R. Wilson, “Hebrew Thought in the Life of the Church,” in *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, ed. Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 131. See also, Walter Zimmirli, *The Old Testament and the World*, trans. John J. Scullon (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), 10.

⁴⁴ Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Dayton: Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1989), 137.

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Their notion of the world starts from the concrete sphere of their land, which is extended only very gradually by widening its scope toward the concept of the inhabited world as a whole. . . . Thus, the spatial world became intelligible to the Hebrews to the degree that they were able to describe it in terms of concrete images.⁴⁵

The concrete understanding of the Hebrews about their world is found in one of the levels of their perception of reality. For them reality is anything related to human experience, not outside of it. Indeed, “[T]he biblical author has conceived, written and intended the creation pericope according to the same pattern of reality he meets in his real life.”⁴⁶ Moreover, “[T]o communicate the subject of creation to human beings it is impossible to avoid using the language and literary forms known to them.”⁴⁷ This idea would not allow us to think that when Gen 1:1 mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth, the author has in mind the world beyond what he had already perceived as a reality on the level of human experience.⁴⁸ Hence, we have to accept the fact that the creation account in Gen 1 is not meant to be scientific or metaphysical. Charles C. Cochran observes that the writer was “not attempting to give a scientific account of the origin of the universe. . . . We are simply told that he did it: God spoke, and it was done.”⁴⁹

The way the Hebrew Scriptures materially describe our world suggests that the ancient Hebrews perceived our world in a concrete way. Tivka Frymer-Kensky, using the biblical data, describes our cosmography as follows:

Our universe is an earth-spaceship, a cosmic submarine. Waters remain above the firmament (Genesis 1:7), and it is in these waters that God established his dwelling chamber (Psalm 104:3, Amos 9:6); there that he keeps his storehouses of rain (Deuteronomy 28:12), wind (Psalm 135:7; Jeremiah 10:13; 51:16), snow and hail (Job 38:22–23); and there that he keeps his weapons (Jeremiah 50:25), almost certainly a term for atmospheric phenomena. From there he waters the mountains (Psalm 104:13). These waters are kept from cascading down upon the earth by the ordinance of God, by the firmament of the sky, and by the locks that guard the sky (Psalm 135:7; Jeremiah 10:12–13; 51:15–16). There are also waters beneath the earth (Exodus 20:4). The storehouses of the earth beneath the ground

⁴⁵ Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological And Literary Study*, Analecta Biblica 39 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970), 180–81.

⁴⁶ Jacques B. Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story: Its Literary Structure*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 5 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP, 1978), 217.

⁴⁷ Tsumura, 43.

⁴⁸ Cf. Frederick C. Grant, *Ancient Judaism and the New Testament* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1959), 59.

⁴⁹ Charles C. Cochran, *The Gospel According to Genesis: A Guide to Understanding Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 5–6.

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are filled with waters (Psalm 33:7), and the great deep stretches out beneath the land (Genesis 49:25).⁵⁰

Whatever one may think of Frymer-Kensky's description of the Hebrew concept of our world, the idea of the concreteness of Hebrew thought cannot be ignored.

The absence of abstraction in the Hebrew worldview is evident in the vivid and most often earthy pictures painted by the Hebrew writers. For example, in Gen 1:2, where it is mentioned that the "Spirit of God was hovering over the waters," "the Hebrew term translated 'hovering' (*m'raḥepet*) is an ornithological term, used in Scripture of an eagle who hovers with loving care over the nest of its young (see Deut 32:11)."⁵¹ Another example is the "filthy rags" in Isa 64:6 (MT 64:5), compared to one's "righteous acts." The Hebrew word for "filthy rags" is *beḡed 'iddim*, which is literally translated as "garment of menstruation."⁵² Moreover, describing heaven (Heb. *šamayim*) as a tent, or a garment, or a cloth⁵³ is another evidence of the Hebrew mental pictures of their world. Such representative examples indicate that the Hebrew worldview is indeed concrete.

The World Is Not Perceived as Preexistent. The last argument against the idea that Gen 1:1 talks about the creation of the universe or about primordial creation is that in Hebrew thought our world is not perceived as preexistent.

Having an impression of the world as preexistent would lead to mythicizing the world as being a god or gods who is (are) present in the uncreated nothingness of space.⁵⁴ Indeed, "the space of the Hebrew . . . is demythologized."⁵⁵ Bernard W. Anderson is doubtful whether the teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* "is found explicitly in Gen. 1 or anywhere else in the OT."⁵⁶ He continues, "the notion of creation out of nothing was undoubtedly too abstract for the Hebraic mind,⁵⁷ and in any case, the idea of a created chaos would have been strange to a narrative which is governed by the view that creation is the antithesis of chaos."⁵⁸

Furthermore, Anderson adds, "there is not the slightest hint that God is bound or conditioned by chaos, as in Babylonian *Enuma Eliš*, which portrays the

⁵⁰ Tivka Frymer-Kensky, "Biblical Cosmology," in *Backgrounds for the Bible*, ed. Michael Patrick O'Connor and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 233. See also, Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. William G. Heidt (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1955), 146.

⁵¹ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 148.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵³ Isa 40:22; cf. Stadelmann, 180.

⁵⁴ Cf. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians*, 196.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ B[ernhard] W. Anderson, "Creation," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:728.

⁵⁷ See William Dyrness, *Themes in the Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 70.

⁵⁸ Anderson, 1:728. Cf. Arthur J. Ferch, *In the Beginning* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1985), 25–26.

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birth of the gods out of the water chaos.”⁵⁹ To the contrary, the biblical creation is through the “effortless, omnipotent, unchallengeable word of a God who transcends the world. The author of Gn 1 thus shows here again his distance from the mythical thought.”⁶⁰ The Hebrew verb *bārā* (“to create”) is used to portray the idea that the world was created by divine fiat. The word *bārā* has significant theological implications.⁶¹

Accordingly, *bārā* “implies that the world came out as something new.” It “is significantly always associated with the idea of newness (Jer 31:22; Isa 65:17; Ps 51:10).”⁶² The term also “affirms unequivocally the truth laid down elsewhere (e.g., Heb. 11:3) that until God spoke, nothing existed.”⁶³ Again, this reinforces the fact that the world is not perceived as preexistent, “implying an essential breach between the actual world and what is before.”⁶⁴

Creation by Word teaches “the dependence of the world in relation to a sovereign God who ‘speaks and things are’ (Ps 33:6–9), who governs the laws of nature (Gn 8:22), and through His providence integrates the universe into the plan of salvation which has man at its center.”⁶⁵

The Hebrew’s conception of the world as limited reflects the idea of the world as not preexistent. It is evident in the “usage of the Hebrew word ‘ancient,’ ‘everlasting’ (*’ôlām*),” which carries limited connotations.⁶⁶ Accordingly, “*’ôlām* is not used in such a cosmic sense within the Hebrew Bible, and other expressions (‘earth’ [*’ēbēl*], ‘heaven and earth’ [*haššāmayim w’hā’āreš*], or ‘the all’ [*kol*]) are similarly limited.”⁶⁷ In fact, “the Hebrew uses two specific words when he wants to refer to the earthly world: *’areš* (Ps 22:27; Isa 23:17) and *’ôlām* (Ps 73:12; Isa 64:4).”⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Anderson, 1:728.

⁶⁰ Hasel, “The Significance of Cosmology,” 11.

⁶¹ See for example, Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “*br’*,” *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:728–35; Jan Bergman, Helmer Ringgren, Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, and G. Johannes Botterweck, “*bārā*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:242–49; Werner Foerster, “*κτίζω*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 3:1000–35.

⁶² Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians*, 196.

⁶³ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, Eng: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 1:43; “And God said” [Gen 1:3], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1953–1978), 1:209.

⁶⁴ Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians*, 196.

⁶⁵ Colombar Lesquirit and Pierre Grelot, “World,” *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2nd and rev. ed., ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour (New York: Seabury, 1973), 677.

⁶⁶ Robert A. Oden, Jr., “Cosmogony, Cosmology,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1163.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians*, 197.

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Apparently, to the Hebraic frame of mind the world is not perceived as pre-existent. If this is so, then in the framework of the creation story in Gen 1, most likely, it is also the way the original writer of Genesis understood the world when he described it.

Conclusion

The question whether the creation account of Gen 1 is also talking about what is beyond the human world has been adequately answered in this paper. We have seen that when we closely examine Gen 1, especially such words as “in the beginning” and “heavens and earth,” contextually and linguistically, we can say that the creation narrative is talking only about our world and is silent about the creation of the entire universe, as we understand the universe today.

Moreover, in our study of the Hebraic understanding of the world in the framework of creation, we discover that there is no hint whatsoever that Gen 1 is concerned with the creation of other planets or other worlds.

Thus, making any scientific inference or metaphysical deduction from the creation account of Gen 1 is unsafe. The creation narrative in Gen 1 is giving neither a scientific explanation nor a scientific mechanism for the process of creation. The simplicity and conciseness of the creation account, expressed in phenomenal human language, do not allow any scientific or philosophical theory to be imposed upon the text. Doing this is not sympathetic to the intent of the Hebrew Bible, nor to its original writers. It is therefore imperative not to go beyond what the Bible plainly says.

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